

In My Own Words:

“Living on The Row to Recovery”

Written by:

Darryl Edwards

Lived on downtown Los Angeles Skid Row for four years. Thanks to Mental Health Services Act he is on the road to hope, wellness, and recovery.

Photographs by: Ken Kondo



DID YOU KNOW? *Downtown Mental Health Center Mental Health Services Act Full Service Partnership (FSP) Office located on Fifth Street and Towne provides intensive case management services to clients who have severe and persistent psychiatric concerns and are high utilizers of acute psychiatric services, state hospital, are chronically homeless and cycle within legal institutions and as a result require more intensive outpatient mental health services to assist them on their road toward recovery and successfully remain in the community. FSP is a 24/7 program which provides supportive therapy, medication support services, assistance with linkage and referral for basic need services such as financial resources, housing, food, medical and substance abuse treatment. The program also provides support to re-establish and maintain social networks, employment and educational services within the community.*



GETTING INVOLVED WITH THE MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ACT (MHSA): Darrell Edwards has been visiting the Downtown Mental Health's MHSA funded Full Service Partnership (FSP) Skid Row Office for one year since its opening. MHSA funded Peer Advocate Stephen Rivera, who lived in downtown Los Angeles Skid Row area for more than 20 years, has helped guide Edwards on the road to recovery from his mental illness.

My name is Darryl Edwards. I am a recovering alcoholic and drug addict. Originally, I made a living as a construction worker in Atlanta, Georgia, but the work caught up to me as I suffered from severe back and leg pains. Eventually, I settled with the construction company, and became labeled officially as a "disabled" person.

I have lived with my mental illness since I was 27 years old. I did not know what was happening to me. I was frustrated and angry. I experienced "auditory" hallucinations, "grandiose" delusions, periods of depression, poly-substance abuse problems, and as a result I was unable to function across, as my psychiatrist would refer to, all psycho-social domains.

My life really made a wrong turn in May 2002 when I was arrested for criminal threats and felony vandalism. I am not proud of that but it really was not my fault, and I now realize that I am very sorry that happened. I was ordered by the Court to Patton State Hospital located in San Bernardino for four years. Prior to that I was confined at a Los Angeles County jail for one year. At Patton State Hospital, I was taught the importance of taking care of myself in addition to the staff encouraging me to participate in anger management, drug abuse and medication management classes. I was starting to show improvement as every Sunday, weather permitting, I was in charge of the Alcoholism Anonymous group sessions. That made me feel good inside, and it gave me a purpose in life once again after all of the trials and tribulations I had endured. I was helping other people deal with their problems. I was released from Patton State Hospital in June 2007.

At age 48, I had a relapse and was admitted to Metropolitan State Hospital and finally diagnosed as a paranoid schizophrenic.

I was somehow released and ended up in Long Beach. I was once again running wild and out of control. I could not believe it and I did not want to hear it. My biggest fear was being labeled by the African-American community as "mental." At the same time my family distanced themselves away from me and this time for good. They did not want anything to do with me. The stigma associated with mental illness had gotten to me and my family. I tried to seek help at a General Relief Office in Long Beach but my case was rejected. The case worker felt sorry for me, gave me a couple of bus tokens and told me go to downtown Los Angeles Skid Row also known as "The Row." I called "The Row" my home for the next four years.

While living on "The Row," I finally decided I needed to get real help, and find out what is happening to me. I went to the Downtown Mental Health Center (DMHC) Mental Health Services Act Full Service Partnership (FSP) Office, boy that is a mouth full, located in the heart of "The Row." I was at first scared and apprehensive because of my last encounter with a government agency, but this time it was different. One of the staff did an assessment of me, and guess what, I qualified for something they called FSP. I was assigned to a case manager by the name of Stephen Rivera. My first meeting with him was an eye opening experience as Mr. Rivera told me about when he lived on "The Row" for more than 20 years. Mr. Rivera also told me that I can recover from my mental illness and live a normal life, fulfilling my life's dreams. All you have to do is believe. All of a sudden, I began to trust him. There were other homeless outreach workers who were trying to get me to come into their shelters and programs but Mr. Rivera's humbleness of living on "The Row" convinced me that I will give this FSP a shot. It was the best decision I have ever made. I am going to tell you it is not easy but I am making it. At the beginning, the FSP program paid for my room at a local hotel. Once my Social Security Insurance (SSI) benefits were approved, I qualified for Section 8 housing. I have my very own apartment. I participate in weekly meetings at the FSP Office with other clients. Mr. Rivera follows up on me twice a week.

Part of the program includes reuniting with my family. I can tell you this, seeing my mother smile for the first time in a long time is worth the weight in gold.

What am I going to be doing next? Well, I want to be a singer/songwriter. I have written 34 songs. My short-term goal is to enroll in the Musicians Institute located in Hollywood. My other goal is to see my favorite baseball team the Los Angeles Dodgers win the World Series this year. To be honest, if it was not for the MHSA and this program, I would still be homeless. I would have no place to go. The MHSA FSP Office on Fifth and Towne saved my life. I owe a great deal of gratitude to Mr. Rivera and the staff there as they provided me with hope, wellness, and recovery. To the politicians who fund this program, please do not cut it as it is making a huge difference in a lot of lives, especially for those who choose to live on "The Row."